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SUBJECT: Austrian Scientists Rally Against Proposed
CERN Withdrawal

¶1. Last week's surprise decision by Austrian Science Minister Johannes Hahn (OVP) to pull out of the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) has appalled Austria's scientific community. Austrian scientists are furious that they will become "second-class" users at CERN after 50 years of participation and just as the Large Hadron Collider comes online. In response, the Austrian Physical Society will shortly submit its online petition (which has garnered 21,000 signatures within just a few days) to Austria's Parliament, asking it to overturn the CERN decision.

¶2. Austrian researchers thought they had managed to stave off severe budget cuts in basic research funding with an earlier petition with 10,000 signatures to the GoA. Nevertheless, the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) has had freeze all decisions on grant applicants and has postponed its first two board meetings of 2009. COMMENT: As the FWF is by far the most significant public agency supporting basic research in Austria, it appears that maintaining its moderate budget took priority over CERN. By pulling money back home, the GOA may also be trying to compensate for an apparent sharp drop-off in private R&D funding. END COMMENT.

¶3. The Ministry intends to redirect Austria's EUR 16 million membership contribution to other international projects and to domestic research programs supported by the FWF. Programs expected to benefit include:
-- European Biobanking and Biomolecular Research Resources Infrastructure Project (Austria),
-- European X-ray Free Electron Laser (Germany),
-- Facility for Antiproton and Ion Research (Germany),
and
-- European Extremely Large Telescope (E-ELT) Project. However, funding for those projects will not be freed up anytime soon. CERN's finance manager says that that a withdrawal would incur Austria high costs (equal to several annual membership contributions) in terms of employee benefit obligations and other contractual commitments which would come due upon Austria's departure.

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